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SUBJECT: POLITICAL PUNDIT ON PRESIDENT'S PLUMMETING POLLS

Classified By: POL Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: At a meeting with a group of foreign diplomats, political consultant Park Sung-min provided his insights on the controversy surrounding the reopening of the Korean market to U.S. beef and his perspective on the recent precipitous drop in President Lee Myung-bak's approval ratings. (Note: In all recent polls, Lee's approval rating has dropped below 30 percent -- lower than any previous administration in its first three months) Park commented that the demonstrations against U.S. beef imports were a platform for the public to demonstrate its frustration with the Lee administration. Park said the furor over beef and protests against Lee would die down in the coming weeks unless Lee made another policy mistake. End Summary.

Four Reasons for Lee's Low Poll Ratings

¶2. (C) Over a May 14 lunch, leading political consultant Park Sung-min proffered four causes for Lee's low approval rating and predicted it would not drop any lower. The first cause was globalization. South Korea, new to the global market, is resistant to Lee's economic proposals, which are intended to raise South Korea's competitiveness and lower the prices of goods. South Koreans interpret Lee's international-focused economic policies to be beneficial to the wealthy but economically damaging to the masses -- an analysis, he conceded, that focused on small businesses and not on consumers.

¶3. (C) The second cause, Park said, was that Lee was fettered by soft public support. A significant number of votes for Lee in the December election were actually votes against former President Roh Moo-hyun, resulting in a weak support base for President Lee. Furthermore, unlike former Presidents Roh and Kim Dae-jung who both built political credibility through a lifetime of sacrifice for Korea's democratization, Lee had little such political capital when he came into office. While Lee does have a compelling "rags to riches" story, he has more to prove to the Korean public.

¶4. (C) The third cause for the drop was the split in conservative support for Lee due to Park Geun-hye's popularity. Park Sung-min noted that the rivalry between the two has existed for years and assessed that their lack of respect and different approaches to policymaking -- Park focuses on principles whereas Lee concentrates on efficiency -- would make it very difficult for the two to reconcile.

15. (C) Finally, the last reason Park attributed to Lee's rash policy decisions and political miscalculations. According to Park, Lee was relying on the economy improving to keep his popularity high, but, with the economy taking a negative hit, he judged that improving relations with the United States would be the next best option. Park said that Lee felt he needed to deliver on the beef issues in order to have a successful summit with President Bush and did not expect the huge outcry from the public.

Beef: A Manifestation of Public Dissatisfaction

16. (C) Park outlined several reasons the public caviled about the beef issue. First and foremost, Park said, the mass demonstrations against U.S. beef imports were motivated by the public's displeasure with Lee's leadership since taking office and, consequently, are likely to die down in the coming weeks. The people have taken umbrage at Lee's high-handed way of governing -- he appointed wealthy advisers to the cabinet and Blue House, he tried to change the ministry structure after what seemed to be a cursory review, and he lifted the ban on U.S. beef imports without public buy-in.

17. (C) Park also said that the mobilization of the youth protesting against the reopening of the beef market underscored a societal shift in South Korea. Park cited teachers' unhappiness with Lee's education policy as a key factor in the large participation of young people in the protests -- some teachers reportedly encouraged their students to join the protests in lieu of school. He also noted that parents have more influence over their children's political views than in the past. The social movement culture, according to Park, has changed since the 1980's when students mainly mobilized among themselves and were rebelling against their conservative parents. Now, for the most part, children and their parents are conservative, allowing parents more influence on their children's political views. Park also explained that this conservatism is why the beef issue has remained an anti-Government -- and not an anti-U.S. -- protest.

Comment

18. (C) While Park's observations on the prevalent conservatism in Korean society is instructive, the ROKG's and President Lee's refusal to turn the public concern over the beef deal against the U.S. is one of the main reasons that anti-Americanism has generally been kept out of the protests.

The Roh Moo-hyun Administration often used nationalism to turn public ire towards the U.S. (or Japan), thereby relieving its own political burden. This administration's refusal to take the same tact is consistent with their statements on the importance of the U.S.-ROK Alliance. With an incoming conservative-dominated National Assembly and no general elections for another four years, President Lee is in a good position to weather the storm.

VERSHBOW